



**TTR**  
REVIEW

# DEIXA NA RÉGUA: AESTHETIC AND SOCIABILITY IN RIO DE JANEIRO'S BARBERSHOPS

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To the sound of passing cars and scenes of children playing on their phones, we see a metal door being opened, unravelling the world created inside the barbershops of Rio de Janeiro's suburbs and periphery.<sup>1</sup> Through the camera lens, always focused on details, and also through the skillful hands of barbers and the heads and hairs shaped by them, we are invited to follow the work, the stories, and histories of three professionals: Belo, Ed, and Deivão. We also follow the relationship developed between them and their clients in their daily lives.

That is the premise of *Deixa na régua*<sup>2</sup> (2016) by Emílio Domingos, a documentary film born out of an interest encouraged in his previous work *A Batalha do passinho* (2012). While filming for this first film on *passinho*<sup>3</sup> dancers and the events where they competed, Domingos realized how difficult it was to schedule interviews with them on weekends. Since his interviewees spent hours at barbershops on those days, waiting for their turn with the barbers who would help them develop the peculiarities of the look adopted by *passinho* dancers.<sup>4</sup>

However, similar to the ones watching the movie, throughout the experience provided by *Deixa na régua*, Domingos realizes that these barbershops are not simply a place where people wait for hours, without complaints, for a haircut, a perfect groom, and well-designed eyebrows. The number of clients waiting as we observe, we also see how skillful the barbers are when creating haircuts and crafts that publicize their work and sets them apart from hairdressers.

Belo is the one who opens the iron door at the beginning of the film and Nelson is the first client we meet, rolled into a barber cape depicting the Brazilian flag. Both are surrounded by symbols (formerly) associated with masculinity, such as football jerseys and boxing equipment. Nelson, the oldest of the bunch when compared to the others who appear in the film, is the one who first ponders about vanity. Although not using this word, he clearly associates his appearance to modernity, which is the reason why he goes to his trusted barber every week. Their intimacy is such that, in the name of a good work, and disregarding the motto "the customer is always right", Belo himself chooses the way his client's hair must be cut and combed.

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1. In Rio de Janeiro, the suburbs are lower-middle class neighborhoods far from downtown, whereas the periphery, although equally far, refers to poor neighborhoods only. (N. T.)

2. *Deixa na régua* is a popular haircut style among young men in Rio's periphery. It is a low fade haircut with either a shaved line or geometrical drawings on the sides. (N. T.)

3. *Passinho*, or 'little step', is a popular dance move that began in Rio's poor neighborhoods. (N. T.)

4. The director himself explained this in an interview during the 40ª Mostra Internacional de São Paulo. Available on: <https://bit.ly/2WSp1BP>.

Although every once in a while the camera's gaze mimics or mixes up with the mirror, the conversation – like the ones shown later – flows with spontaneity, without a clear interference from the director. Most frames privilege the relationship between the barber and his client, especially the frames that highlight the barber's skills, or "gift", and the patience of those who wait long hours for their turn.

Those who appear in the background waiting to be called are not forgotten. They are framed by the camera when telling their stories; at times they appear when the barbers' arms and hands meet the head and shoulders of their clients, forming a single space, a frame. In that sense, one way or another, the spotlight goes to characters who engage with the context at ease. Following the "fly on the wall" style, we watch haircuts and trivial conversations unfolding unassumingly before our eyes, in a laid-back manner, without control, followed by the sound of scissors and hair clippers.

After our first contact with Belo, we are taken to another place where images of people on the street, spaghetti wires and unfinished houses, combined with the sound of dogs barking, introduce us to this new set we are about to face. Suddenly, we see a corridor and an ajar door used by a young man to enter the place. We are then introduced to Ed, a young black man standing in front of a mirror grooming his mustache. That scene is not unique in the film, in the interval between a customer and another, we also see Belo and Deivão (who will be later introduced), in their moments of self-care.

Back to the focus on Ed, the framing shows details of the following scenes, presenting some boxes of razor blades and combs on the balcony. While designing a client's eyebrow, Ed talks (with his back to the camera or the mirror) about how uncomfortable and unpleasant a *baile* could be without styling one's hair and beard, "your ego changes", agrees a young man getting a haircut, "Do you feel, like? Good in society", he goes on. The graffiti on the walls combined with the place itself and the barber's name call upon a famous Tim Burton character: Edward Scissorhands.

Regulars of the barbershop know they might have to wait a lot for their turn, but they do not give up and simply leave their names on a notebook, spending their waiting time chatting with others or taking a nap, like it happens at other barbershops.

The same happens in another neighborhood in Rio's periphery. A great tree in the background, clothes on the clothesline, and a yellow house in a backyard separated from the street by a wooden fence, everything

indicates we moved to a place where other stories are about to be told. Inside, we see a poster for hair styling pomade and pairs of pictures showing clients before and after getting their hair and beard done. Deivão, a black man with tattooed arms, has already been introduced, but now he is shown with prominence, anxiously talking on the phone about the coming birth of his child. In this film, cellphones are greatly relevant, being an instrument used to pick a look and take pictures of a new haircut. Cellphones are also an important ally in the waiting time spent at the barbershop.

From there on, the images of all three barbershops, with their clients, alternate on the screen and, through the lens of Emílio Domingos, we see how these places have become a space of sociability for their regulars, but not only the youngsters. The older ones, just like the children and adolescents, are not absent; some of them, active clients of the barbershop, seek a modern look that only a prestigious barber (as demonstrated by the waiting lines), and the right haircut, can provide. In these places, meeting points for friends and customers, the ideal of masculinity is not completely forgotten, however, the social imaginary about what being a man is as often as not, questioned without much resistance.

There is no indication that these barbers know each other, but we can infer that all three had their workplace transformed because, besides being a place of vanity (reflected throughout the film on the mirrors and aimed at the camera), self-esteem and visibility, they can also be considered places of identity affirmation. Identities of both the regulars and barbers who inscribe the sign of their work and skill on people's heads.

Once these places are seized by their regulars, they become places for exchange. The silence is rare, often replaced by discussions on several subjects such as the differences between haircuts in the south of the city and periphery; the misconceptions and dangers that the "wrong" comb might bring; the downsides of life in periphery and the occupation of barber as an alternative to life in crime; discrimination, love relationships; parties; the best pizza in the neighborhood, soup operas, favorite actors; military dictatorship and democracy, among other subjects that compose the barbershops as places where everything is talked for hours.

As described by both classical and current anthropologists and sociologists – from Simmel and the Chicago School to José Guilherme Mag-nani – some particularities to the sociability are forged in urban contexts that are influenced by the diverse spaces for coexisting in the city. In the film, those barbershops are surely special places for coexistence where diverse social relations and diverse dynamics are built.

In this film, we find men who, thanks to their work as barbers, find a way of living and self-expression. These men are key mediators in a place open to conversations and reflections on life, family, the periphery, and even the country. Spaces, at last, where their regulars (who are mostly black men) can reveal collectively and unassumingly trivial situations, their dreams and hopes, worldviews and imaginaries.

Thus, by focusing on these barbershops from Rio's periphery, places that, when compared to new "gentrified" spaces of masculinity, are quite simple, Emílio Domingos leads us to recognize that the suburbs and periphery of Rio at their most peculiar, at their vigor create "fashion", styles, and cultural and aesthetical innovations.

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